

Before the
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
POSTAL REGULATORY COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, DC 20268-0001

Sublime Post Office
Sublime, Texas

Docket No. A2011-45

COMMENTS OF THE PUBLIC REPRESENTATIVE

(November 23, 2011)

I. SUMMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

The Commission received an appeal for review of the closing of the Sublime, Texas Post Office. The petition which was filed by Betty Bunch on behalf of the Save the Sublime Post Office Committee (Petitioner) is dated August 5, 2011, and was posted on the Commission's website on August 11, 2011.¹ In Order No. 801 the Commission instituted a proceeding under 39 U.S.C. 404(d)(5), designated the case as Docket No. A2011-45 to consider the Petitioner's appeal and designated the undersigned as Public Representative.²

The Petitioner raises the following issues: the Postal Service failed to consider whether or not it will continue to provide a maximum degree of effective and regular postal services to the community. See 39 U.S.C. 404(d)(2)(A)(iii).

¹ Petition Received from Betty Bunch on Behalf of the Save the Sublime Post Office Committee, August 11, 2011, (Petition).

² Notice and Order Accepting Appeal and Establishing Procedural Schedule, August 12, 2011 (Order No. 801).

The Commission's Notice designated August 26, 2011, as the date for the Postal Service to file the administrative record. On August 26, 2011, the Postal Service filed an electronic copy of the administrative record in response to Order No. 801.³ On October 5, 2011, the Postal Service filed notice of the addition to the record of specific pages left out of the original filing.⁴ The Commission's Notice also set forth the date for the Petitioner's filing of a brief or supplemental response. The Petitioner's response was due on September 15, 2011. The Petitioner filed the Participant Statement on September 16, 2011.⁵ Comments were filed by the Postal Service on October 5, 2011.⁶ In its Comments the Postal Service states that the Petitioner raises the issue as presented in the Commission's Notice. Postal Service Comments at 1.

II. DISCUSSION

The Petitioner asserts that the Postal Service did not consider the effect of the closing of the Sublime post office on the community and that the reasons given for closing including the postmaster vacancy, low revenue, and no running water or restroom facilities for employees are insufficient to discontinue the facility. Petition at 1. The Petitioner also filed a copy of a petition supporting the maintenance of small and rural post offices. *Id.* at 3-20. The Petitioner's Participant Statement discusses financial savings that she believes that the Postal Service has not exercised. Additionally, she documents the dedication she and the officer-in-charge have shown in their work at the Sublime post office under less than ideal conditions. Participant Statement at 1. The Petitioner states that she expects the Postal Service to show the same dedication to

³ United States Postal Service Notice of Filing, August 26, 2011 (Administrative Record).

⁴ United States Postal Service Notice of Filing, October 5, 2011 (Addition to Administrative Record).

⁵ Participant Statement from Betty Bunch Regarding the Sublime, Texas Post Office, October 5, 2011 (Participant Statement).

⁶ United States Postal Service Comments Regarding Appeal, October 5, 2011 (Postal Service Comments).

preserving the facility that has provided postal services to the community for many years. *Id.*

The Petitioner does not dispute specific facts in the record but asserts that in spite of these facts the Postal Service does not have valid reasons to close the Sublime post office.

Regular and effective postal services. As the Petitioner has been a postmaster serving at the Sublime post office, I am sure she has experienced significant changes in the mail volume at the post office as well as in the economy in the Sublime, Texas community.

The Postal Service's administrative record provides background on the Sublime post office. The Sublime post office, an EAS -53 level facility, provides service from 9:15 a.m. to 12:45 p.m., Monday through Friday and 9:15 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. on Saturday. It has 24 hour lobby hours available Monday through Saturday. It provides service to 48 post office box or general delivery customers. Final Determination at 2. The retail window transactions averaged 9 transactions for a total of 10 minutes of retail workload per day. Revenue has declined at the Sublime post office during the past three fiscal years. Office receipts were \$19,611 in FY 2008, \$15,137 in FY 2009, and \$9,196 in FY 2010. *Id.* The Postal Service proposes to close the Sublime post office and provide delivery and retail services by rural route service under the administrative responsibility of the Hallettsville Post Office located 10 miles away. *Id.* The Postal Service states that cluster box units (CBUs) will be used for customers which are individually locked mail compartments to be installed and maintained by the Postal Service at no cost to the customer. Additionally, it states that a parcel locker may also be installed. *Id.* However, in the administrative record itemization of costs for the savings resulting from the closing the Postal Service indicates that no parcel lockers will be installed. Administrative Record Item No. 41 at 7.

The Postal Service asserts that the reasons for the closing are: (1) the postmaster position is vacant and the facility earns less than 1.55 hours daily which is below the level required to function as an independent post office, (2) the office does

not have a restroom or running water and (3) regular and effective service using rural route carrier can be provided. The Postal Service asserts that the carrier can provide retail services to customers that will alleviate the need for customers to travel to the post office. Further, the record indicates that the postmaster was promoted on January 12, 2010 and the postmaster position remains vacant. If this office was staffed by a noncareer postmaster replacement (PMR) they can be separated from the Postal Service even though attempts may be made to reassign the employee to a nearby facility. There are no other employees that are impacted by the closing. *Id.*

On March 2, 2011, the Postal Service distributed 48 questionnaires to the delivery customers and provided retail customers access to questionnaires over the counter. Of the 48 questionnaires, 19 were returned and responses were 0 favorable, 9 unfavorable, and 10 expressed no opinion. *Id.* Additionally, on March 16, 2011, Postal Service representatives met with customers of the Sublime post office to address questions regarding the proposed closing.

The record states that the Hallettsville post office, an EAS level 18 post office with window service hours from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 pm. Monday through Friday and 9:00 to 11:00 on Saturday will oversee the rural route service for the Sublime community.

In its description of concerns raised by the patrons during the proposal posting period from April 18, 2011, to June 19, 2011, an issue was discussed about delivery of mail on the road that the customer lives. The Postal Service's response was that the customer could make a request to find out if the rural carrier route actually goes down the road that the customer lives on. *Id.* at 4. Because there were also questions raised about postal service access for senior citizens and persons with disabilities, location of the boxes for the rural route service is very important. The Hallettsville post office is 10 miles away, which is not a short distance. The patrons of the Sublime post office should secure definitive answers to questions concerning delivery routes and access for seniors and the disabled, particularly because the rural carrier may not be easily accessible if the route is not on the same road as the customer's residence or business. Even though the Postal Service is correct that it is not necessary to be present in order

to conduct business with the carrier, the actual route location may provide additional access issues for some patrons. The Postal Service indicates that, "special provisions are made for hardship cases or special customer needs. To request an exception for hardship delivery customers may contact the administrative postmaster for more information." Patrons should exercise this option as necessary if additional assistance is necessary. The administrative record provides the names of Postal Service representatives to contact in the event the outcome is unsatisfactory.

The record contains the results of questionnaires and responses from the Postal Service, community meetings and responses to issues raised during the meetings that demonstrate that the Postal Service considered the community's concerns about the closings effect on postal services. Based on a review of the administrative record and petitioner's concerns it appears that the postal service can provide regular and effective postal services with the alternative rural route carrier service and administrative oversight by the Hallettsville post office. The distance of the Hallettsville post office from Sublime is somewhat disconcerting but the patrons have Postal Service representatives identified in the record to respond to issues that arise concerning proper administrative oversight by Hallettsville or issues concerning rural route carrier service. The Postal Service has complied with 39 U.S.C. 404(d)(2)(A)(iii)).

Economic savings. The Postal Service estimates that the economic savings from closing the Sublime Post Office will be \$16,152. The Postal Service indicates that there will be an expense of \$2,213 for installation of CBU's. However, it does not include the expense in the calculation of annual savings. Also, the record presents conflicting amounts for the cost of replacement service. In the proposal for closing the annual cost of replacement service is \$4,820. Administrative Record Item No. 41 at 7. The record also includes information that states the cost of annual replacement service is \$4,979.52. Administrative Record Item No. 17 at 2. The Final Determination states that a parcel locker may be installed but there are no costs associated with the installation in the itemization of costs. Final Determination at 7. Since there are projected savings with the closing of the location. It would be beneficial to postal service

patrols impacted by the closings if accurate and consistent information is included in the record.

Respectfully Submitted,
/s/ Cassandra L. Hicks
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